Welcome to this Short Course:

Heartaches and hard-won wisdom: Exploring Coming of Age Short Stories

led by Patty Payette, Ph.D.
University of Louisville
Third session: June 18
Welcome!

• Introductions
  (name & share the best or most rewarding thing about coming of age)

Roadmap:
• Metaphors/maps of the “coming of age” journey
• Exploration and discussion of “What Means Switch” and “This Boy’s Life”
• Preview and preparation for our next session
Coming of age genre—what is it?

Coming of age: a story that relates an adolescent’s movement toward adulthood and the corresponding awakening to a new understanding of his or herself and the world around him or her.
One way to “map” of the coming of age journey

Innocence
simlicity;
sense of safety
and security

Moments of crisis, change
discord; complexity; tension;
conflict; freedom; loss; imperfection;
opportunity and risk

Wisdom
compassion;
acceptance;
fortitude;
awareness;
Create your own *metaphoric visual map* for coming of age

Your group is going to come up with an image that represents the journey of coming of age that works as a metaphoric visual map (e.g. “it is like a journey through a forest off the beaten path..” or “it is like a tree, growing taller, weathering the storms…”)* and captures the process of awakening to new understandings, challenges, triumphs, etc.*

Have fun, be creative and work to capture the spirit of “heartaches and hard-won wisdom” and what we’re learning in this short course.
Debrief

• How did you see the coming of age process in new ways?

• What about adulthood? Is it “off the map”?

• How do the metaphors give us new insight not just into coming of age, but of what it means to be human and to be alive?
Themes for the short course

- Money, class and socioeconomic status
- Mentors and positive/negative role models
- Relationship to, and separation from, parents and family
- Cultural and racial background and expectations
- Love and sexuality/gender norms
- Friendship and role of peers

protagonist
What’s going on with the protagonist? What is the tone of the text (happy, sad, resigned, content)?

What words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs seem to be especially revealing about the protagonist’s inner and outer journey?

What are the objects, people or places that are significant on this journey? Why or how are they significant?

What might the components in the story symbolize in the coming of age process beyond the story itself?
Gish Jen

**Background**
- Born 1955 in Scarsdale, NY
- Parents emigrated from China in 1940s
- First name Lillian, but nicknamed Gish for actress Lillian Gish
- Graduated from Harvard with B.A. and went on to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop
- Short stories and novels that focus on issues of identity, American multiculturalism and role of immigration, but defies every stereotype
- Recent work examines the interdependent self vs. the doctrine of individualism as an East vs. West contrast

**“What Means Switch”**
- Published in The Atlantic in 1990
- Reprinted in several anthologies
- Became the basis for the novel “Mona in the Promised Land” (1997)
Gish Jen on the West vs. East concept of self

“Many Selves” opinion pieces:

The American *Independent Self*: “I am…”
- acutely aware of my autonomy
- the protagonist of my own autobiographical novel
- a unique individual
- an enterprising, action-oriented self

The Asian *Interdependent Self*: “I am…”
- acutely aware of my social role
- a cast member in a movie touching on my existence
- a person living in context of the world around me
- held accountable by those within my community
Mapping with “What Means Switch”

Working at your table, trace Mona’s journey by “mapping” and isolating what you think are up to 4-6 important realizations, events or moments in this story.

Give each point on the map words or a phrase that captures the complexity or challenge of that point.

Consider focusing on moments that deal with one or more of these themes:
✓ cultural/racial expectations (implicit and explicit)
✓ friendship
✓ love and sexuality/gender
✓ parents
✓ mentors
Analyzing—taking the text apart and seeing how the discrete components fit together to create a whole

Author’s context

Reader’s context

Text

Coming of age conventions
Tobias Wolff

Background
- Born 1945 in Birmingham, AL
- Parents divorced when he was 4 and separated him and his brother
- Nomadic childhood with his mother & her abusive relationships with men
- Tobias faked his way into boarding school & failed out
- Served in Vietnam before getting his degree at Oxford
- Began his writing career and became a “self-made intellectual.”
- Professor of English/writing at Stanford

“This Boy’s Life”
- Memoir that cemented his reputation in 1989
- Traces his difficult childhood and reinvention
- Won Whiting Writers’ Award
- Turned into film in 1993
More mapping with “This Boy’s Life”

Working at your table, trace young Tobias’ journey by “mapping” and isolating what you think are up to 4-6 important realizations, events or moments in this story.

Give each point on the map words or a phrase that captures the complexity or challenge of that point.

Consider focusing on moments that deal with one or more of these themes:

- cultural/racial expectations (implicit and explicit)
- friendship
- love and sexuality/gender
- parents
- mentors
Thinking about the two texts…

• Happy ending? Yes? No? or something else?

• Who ends up learning the most about themselves or the world?

• How does writing fiction and writing a memoir allow for different approaches to telling the story of the self?
Final class!

Our last class session is next Tuesday, June 25. For that session, you are invited to read:

“Where Is It Written?” by Adam Schwartz (p.82)
“Marigolds” by Eugenia Collier (p.254)

I chose these two stories as our last two texts to read, in part because I feel that the protagonists grow and make an important shift at the end of their episodes. What do think about the endings of these two stories? Do they represent a signpost of maturity that stands apart from the other stories we have read?